



a **GRAND** entrance into milling

Pakistan-based Volka Food International enters milling sector with large, state-of-the-art mill featuring Ocrim equipment

by Arvin Donley

Volka Food International is building its first flour mill in Multan, Pakistan.

Bakery and confectionery products are only as good as the flour that's used to make them. That's why Pakistan-based Volka Food International (VFI), a major manufacturer of those products in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, recently decided it was time to enter the flour milling business.

"The greatest challenge we are facing, a challenge that will persist, is to have stable quality flour in the region," Faheem Shahzad, a production executive with VFI, told *World Grain*. "That's why we are pioneers to take the step and go for European (milling) technology that can offer us stable quality flour."

The company has hired Cremona, Italy-based Ocrim SpA to design and equip VFI's flour mill in Multan, Pakistan. The facility, which will have a daily production capacity of 800 tonnes (wheat equivalent), is under construction and is scheduled to become operational in the summer of 2022.

Shahzad said the milling capacity is "600% bigger than our competitors in Pakistan, and our mill is considered one of the largest of South Asia."

Although Pakistan has a large flour milling industry with nearly 1,000 mills producing up to 80,000 tonnes of flour (wheat equivalent) daily, according to the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, most of the country's mills operate with outdated technology, which is why VFI's decision to enter the milling sector with a large, highly automated plant is drawing a lot of attention.

Shahzad said the decision to build the mill stemmed from the company's desire to be self-reliant in terms of its flour supply.

"Most of the flour being produced at our flour mill will be consumed internally by our other companies," Shahzad said. "Our external customers will be manufacturers of buns, breads, and the restaurant industry."

Quick path to success

Although VFI has only been in existence since 2008, it has quickly established itself as a leading manufacturer of confectionery, bakery and pasta products not only in Pakistan but in other countries. Its confectionery product range includes bubble gum, chew toffee, lollipops and chocolate.

After three years of establishing itself in the domestic market, VFI in 2011 started exporting confectionery products to many Asian, Middle East and European countries and posted a turnover of \$1.8 million that year.

By 2012, several VFI brands had become a dominant force in Pakistan's confectionery market. Its flagship brand, Jelly, grabbed a 40% market share in the country's confectionery market and the brand now has a 20% to 30% market share in the international confectionery markets where its products are sold.

As demand for its products has grown, so has its operations. Starting with 600 employees, the company's workforce has grown to more than 1,500, including a sales staff that in the last year has increased from 200 employees to more than 350.

Demand for bakery products growing

In the company's bakery products segment, two trends are driving growth: an increase in per capita wheat-based foods consumption and annual population

growth in Pakistan of 2%, which is among the highest in the world. Its high fertility rate is among the leading reasons that Pakistan now ranks No. 6 in the world in population and is forecast to be the third most populous country by 2055.

Wheat flour contributes 72% of calorific intake among Pakistanis, with per capita wheat consumption at around 124 kilograms each year, one of the highest levels in the world.

Pakistan also has served as an important wheat flour exporter to neighboring Afghanistan, sending as much as 700,000 tonnes to the war-torn country in some years.

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Faheem Shahzad, production executive, VFI

"The flour consumption has never been slowed in our country and has always been high in demand as it is considered an affordable product," Shahzad said. "We will be mainly carrying out our internal quality flour needs for the food manufacturing so that we offer our people with good quality products and the same quality products will be exported."

Although Pakistan produced a record wheat crop of 27 million tonnes in the 2021-22 marketing year, it was insufficient to meet the country's surging domestic consumption requirements and maintain adequate strategic reserves. Formerly a net wheat exporter, Pakistan in 2021-22 imported nearly 2 million tonnes, mostly duty-free from Russia and Ukraine after the Pakistani government removed an import duty on wheat in 2020.

"This decision is likely to remain in place until the government is satisfied that domestic wheat production will be sufficient to meet the country's demand," according to a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) attaché. "In the past year, Pakistan has undergone a historic shift from being an exporter of wheat to a major importer of wheat. The main reason for this shift is that Pakistan's wheat production is not keeping up with the increase in population."

Looking to capitalize on this population-growth trend, VFI is preparing to increase the supply of wheat-based products in the market and is building the flour mill so it can have more control over its flour supply.

"We entered the flour milling business to cover the gap between the public demand and stable quality

Ocrim installed cyclone rotary airlocks in the VFI flour mill, which will be completed by the summer of 2022.





flour,” Shahzad said. “We intend to offer international quality flour to the people of Pakistan and fill the gaps in the flour supply.”

Although Pakistan is no longer self-sufficient in wheat, Shahzad said VFI will source the vast majority of its wheat from local producers.

“Our R&D team will keep on working to develop many flour types, but initially we plan to produce flour to make crackers, biscuits, pastas, cake, pizza and buns,” Shahzad said.

Construction on the mill began earlier this year and the company has had to endure several COVID-19-related delays, Shahzad said. When completed, the milling complex will be seven stories tall, have daily production capacity of 800 tonnes and feature 32 silos that can store a combined 80,000 tonnes of wheat.

State-of-the-art technology

When VFI commissioned Ocrim to be its equipment supplier and mill designer, it was committed to invest in the most highly automated milling technology the industry had to offer.

“We saw Ocrim as a partner capable of offering and delivering solutions aligned with our expectations in terms of flexibility, efficiency, reliability and technological and technical innovation,” Shahzad said. “The mill design was specifically tailor-made to our requirements and the latest technological solutions that were applied will make this state-of-the-art plant the first of its kind in Pakistan.”

Shahzad said the Ocrim mill design incorporates the latest energy-saving solutions, combined with quality in-line monitoring and processing equipment that can be automatically adjusted to ensure a consistent high-quality finished product.

“The highest level of automation in terms of SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) and MES (Manufacturing Execution System) for the operation and management of the mill will allow us to efficiently

monitor and manage the efficiency of all the process areas of the plant,” Shahzad said. “The levels of automation foreseen in this plant will be a tool that will inevitably help our millers to run the mill efficiently.”

Food safety was another important aspect of the mill design, as stainless steel is the predominant material. Anti-microbial sieves also are featured, Shahzad said.

“Food safety design solutions were implemented in order to ensure the utmost sanitation levels,” Shahzad said. “Another food safety aspect is that the mill will be a closed-window mill, equipped with air makeup and air moisture additional technology to ensure an ideal and constant internal process environment.”

Among VFI’s biggest challenges in constructing such a highly automated mill is finding well-trained employees to operate it, Shahzad said.

“We are still facing a lot of difficulties finding qualified and trained employees,” he said. “We have to explore the markets of other regions of the world to find the talent/staff.”

Given VFI’s commitment to quality and excellence in its food products, the company’s investment in state-of-the-art technology in its first flour mill comes as no surprise.

“Based on the legacy of excellence in confectionery, bakery and pasta, Volka Food International is delivering health and appetizing food products globally,” Saim Zulfiqar, VFI’s chief executive officer, stated on the company’s website. “Our dedication to succeed compels us to understand the taste preference of our customers and select the finest recipes and ingredients to create the magic of our mouth-watering food products. Produced in the world’s best and most modern technological facilities, our products are so rich in taste and quality that it wins hearts and minds around the world.”

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Construction on VFI’s new flour mill is expected to be completed within the next six months.

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